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SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

U.S. Special Envoy Sen. George Mitchell to Israel, West Bank

Key stories in the media:

All media reported on the arrival in Israel last night of U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace former Senator George Mitchell. Israel Radio quoted a source in PM Benjamin Netanyahu's bureau as saying that Israel's friendly relations with the U.S. are very deep. The radio reported that DM Ehud Barak told Mitchell that it is possible to reach coordination and strategic understandings with the U.S. while maintaining Israel's interests. The Jerusalem Post, which headlines: Mitchell Calls for Understandings with Israel on All Regional Issues, reported that DM Barak told Mitchell that the U.S. can and needs to coordinate and reach understandings on all the issues on the regional agenda. The Jerusalem Post quoted Mitchell as saying in Morocco before coming to Israel: In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we believe that the two-state solution, two states living side by side in peace, is the best and only way to resolve this conflict. Maariv said that Mitchell is coming with a clear message from the U.S. administration that it is intent on leading a diplomatic process. Maariv cited concerns in Israel that gaps in views between the two countries may lead to tensions. HaQaretz reported that Mitchell is expected to ask Netanyahu during their meeting today to clarify Israel's position regarding the resumption of negotiations with the Palestinians and Syria. According to HaQaretz, a decision has been made in Washington to follow a regional peace plan that will be based on the Arab peace initiative, bolstered by international security guarantees for Israel. Under this plan, Arab states will proceed with normalization of ties with Israel in parallel with progress in the negotiations to be held on the Palestinian and Syrian tracks. A senior U.S. administration official told HaQaretz several days ago that the U.S. is committed to the principles of the Quartet, which set the acceptance of a two-state solution as a precondition for talks with a Palestinian unity government. The official added that the U.S. expects the Israeli government to adopt the same principle, in line with commitments made by the previous Israeli government at the Annapolis conference in November 2007. HaQaretz quoted Palestinian sources as saying yesterday that they intend to present clear demands to Israel through the U.S. envoy as preconditions for resuming final status talks. In an interview with the PA daily Al-Ayyam, the sources were quoted as saying that PA President Mahmoud Abbas will ask Mitchell to press Israel to recognize the principle of two states for two nations. Moreover, the Palestinians would like Israel to agree to talk about all aspects of a final settlement that will ultimately result in the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.

Israel Radio reported that Mitchell will again meet DM Barak today, as well as FM Avigdor Lieberman, President Shimon Peres, and opposition leader Tzipi Livni.

Yediot Aharonot (Shimon Shiffer) reported that the Obama administration is sharpening its statements on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and that it is hinting to the Netanyahu government that the handling of the Iranian nuclear issue will depend on progress in negotiations and an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. The newspaper reported that White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel told a Jewish leader that a permanent-status agreement will be reached between Israel and the Palestinians, no matter what. Yediot Aharonot further reported that Netanyahu might postpone his visit to Washington because President Obama cannot find the time to meet him.

HaQaretz quoted Quartet Middle East envoy Tony Blair as saying in an interview in TIME Magazine that in talks with PM Netanyahu, the Israeli premier suggested that a Palestinian state be established from the bottom up. Blair said that Netanyahu's plan calls for the question of the borders of the Palestinian state and the fate of Jewish settlements and Jerusalem to be deferred to the final stage. The first step would concentrate on the consolidation of Palestinian institutions, strengthening its security forces, and reconstructing the economy in the territories. Netanyahu reportedly is not opposed to the PA assuming attributes of statehood at this stage.

Leading media quoted Egyptian FM Ahmed Abu al-Gheit as saying yesterday in an interview with Russia Today-TV that his Israeli counterpart, Avigdor Lieberman, is not welcome in Egypt. Abu al-Gheit said: "His feet will not step on Egyptian soil as long as he maintains his positions."

HaQaretz quoted security sources as saying that yesterday Egyptian police found 900 kg of explosives near the Gaza border and that they detained three Palestinian youths on suspicion of crossing illegally into Egypt. The media also reported that a Qassam rocket landed in the western Negev after a period of calm.

Leading media quoted GOI officials as saying yesterday that Israel will not cooperate with a UN Human Rights Council investigation into whether war crimes were committed during Operation Cast Lead earlier this year.

Yediot Aharonot reported that the QDurban 2Q anti-racism conference may fizzle, as European nations decide tomorrow whether to participate in the conference or boycott it.

U.S. Special Envoy Sen. George Mitchell to Israel, West Bank:

Summary:

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: Qthe sooner Iran's toxic sway over the region is dissipated, the better the prospects that Mitchell can help us all move toward reconciliation.

Shlomo Avineri, Hebrew University Professor of Political Science and former director-general of the Foreign Ministry, wrote in the independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: Q[George MitchellQs] mission is liable to disintegrate; instead of dealing with the peace process, he might be sucked into resolving local crises. It will be important to think creatively.

Ha'aretz editorialized: QIran and Hizbullah are Egypt's enemies no less than they are Israel's. It behooves us to remember this, even when it appears that Egypt is positioning itself on the other side of the divide.

Liberal columnist and anchor Ofer Shelach wrote in the popular, pluralist Maariv: QAn almost united international coalition is urging Israel to move out of its shell, break the Middle East stalemate, and create a new front against the real threats confronting it. An elected Israeli government responds to the pressure by turning a blind eye.

Senior Middle East affairs analyst Zvi Bar'el wrote in Ha'aretz: QObama's foreign policy prestige will face its greatest test in [the] negotiations [with Iran].

Columnist Meir Gross wrote in the nationalist, Orthodox Makor Rishon-Hatzofe: QMay I suggest that the Jews be generous and give up Morocco -- and even Algeria.

Block Quotes:

QHelping Mitchell

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (4/16): QWith the threat of an Iranian nuclear device hanging over us, emboldening this region's extremists and cowing its moderates, it is improbable that Mitchell will make much headway on the Palestinian track. Furthermore, the Palestinian polity is paralyzed by divisions between an ascendant Hamas and a fading Fatah. Yet in rejecting an unprecedentedly magnanimous peace plan proffered by the Kadima government late last year, Mahmoud Abbas's Qmoderates exposed themselves as unwilling to make the most rudimentary compromises necessary to achieve a two-state solution. And while we welcome Abbas's cordial pre-Passover telephone call to Netanyahu, what Israelis would really like to happen is for Fatah to become a genuine alternative to Hamas. That means preparing its people for the kinds of painful concessions they will have to make -- alongside the painful concessions Israelis have already indicated a willingness to make - for peace. So the sooner Iran's toxic sway over the region is dissipated, the better the prospects that Mitchell can help us all move toward reconciliation.

II. QFrom the Bottom Up

Shlomo Avineri, Hebrew University Professor of Political Science and former director-general of the Foreign Ministry, wrote in the independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (4/16): QThe Irish conflict was basically a religious one, fought between two communities speaking the same language and sharing a common history. Here we have a struggle between two national movements with some religious aspects. While no one in Northern Ireland casts doubt over Britain's right to exist, many on the Palestinian side question the

legitimacy of the Jewish state, and some Israelis doubt the right of the Palestinian nationality to exist. Despite this, some lessons can be learned from Northern Ireland.. Decommissioning all militias should be a precondition for elections. Mitchell, meanwhile, faces the challenge of achieving an effective truce between Israel and Hamas, rebuilding Gaza and opening the crossings. His mission is liable to disintegrate; instead of dealing with the peace process, he might be sucked into resolving local crises. It will be important to think creatively. Even those who supported the Oslo Accords cannot deny that the process failed for reasons beyond the obstacles put up by both parties. In the last two years, the Quartet's Middle East envoy Tony Blair and U.S. Security Coordinator Keith Dayton have made some successful attempts to build Palestinian institutions from the bottom up. These actions are not at all similar to Benjamin Netanyahu's economic peace, intended to serve as an alternative to a Palestinian state. On the contrary, they are the only successful attempts so far to create infrastructure for a state. True this process is gradual and bound to take time, but the other process -- the top-down one -- failed, and it was time to admit it. One last comment, on the Syrian front. Mitchell should look into a sensitive issue at his next meeting with the Syrians: Does their position stem from merely trying to maintain their occupation of land in 1948, or is it something deeper -- a non-recognition of the Middle East's borders, claiming they were set by Western imperialism after World War I? This is not merely a theoretical question, because it can help explain Syria's approach to Lebanon and other regional issues.

III. QIn the Same Boat

Ha'aretz editorialized (4/16): QEgypt's resolute response to the terror network again points to the mutual interests underpinning the peace between Israel and Egypt. Israel and Egypt are at the core of this matter. Both countries are considered legitimate targets in the eyes of Hizbullah and Iran. The two countries see eye to eye not only on the fight against terror organizations, but also against those who send and fund them. Iran and Hizbullah are Egypt's enemies no less than they are Israel's. It behooves us to remember this, even when it appears that Egypt is positioning itself on the other side of the divide.

IV. QDid Anybody Say Golda Meir?

Liberal columnist and anchor Ofer Shelach wrote in the popular, pluralist Maariv (4/16): QAn almost united international coalition -- a new, energetic U.S. administration, Europe, and the moderate Arab countries -- is urging Israel to move out of its shell, break the Middle East stalemate, and create a new front against the real threats confronting it. An elected Israeli government responds to the pressure by turning a blind eye. It is its full right, of course, since it has a fresh mandate from the public. But almost no one -- in politics, the media, or public squares -- protests, cries out, or warns against what this indifference will bring Israel.

V. QTehran's First QYes

Senior Middle East affairs analyst Zvi Bar'el wrote in Ha'aretz (4/16): QIt appears Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has begun treating the declarations of U.S. President Barack Obama as policy, and this is a substantive response to the new American strategy, coordinated with the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Tehran and Washington are now forming a joint position on Iran's right to equal treatment and the need to lift all preconditions for negotiations. This way Obama has adopted the demand for mutual respect that Iran has desired as the basic principle for negotiations. However, the new public rhetoric is no alternative to negotiations. Obama's foreign policy prestige will face its greatest test in these negotiations. His conduct will determine the future of nuclear arms development and Iran's willingness to stabilize the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, two issues that have become central to Obama's policies.

VI. QTwo States for Two Peoples

Columnist Meir Gross wrote in the nationalist, Orthodox Makor Rishon-Hatzofe (4/16): QYes, there are two peoples in the Middle East -- the Jewish people and the Arab people. There are 22 Arab states that share the same mentality, language, and religion. There are many more Muslim states. This means that the plan that the entire world is fervently embracing is calling for a redivision of the entire region between Jews and Arabs. May I suggest that the Jews be generous and give up Morocco -- and even Algeria. All the rest will be divided in equal parts between the two peoples in the region. That agreement will bring peace to the region and perhaps to the entire world.

CUNNINGHAM